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ABSTRACT

To understand the specific differences between technical writing and ordinary writing, it is helpful to consider five definitions cited by W. Earl Britton: (1) technical writing deals with subject matter in science, engineering, and business; (2) it demands a specialized vocabulary, particularly of adjectives and nouns; (3) it involves a tightly logical thought sequence; (4) it involves precision in sentence structure and in word choice; and (5) it conveys one precise meaning. English teachers who teach technical writing courses must teach many skills beyond those taught in ordinary composition courses. Students should learn to deal with forms and applications and with categories of letters, memoranda, and reports which they will encounter in business and industry. They should learn about graphics, including pictorial material (photographs, drawings, paintings, and maps) and symbolic graphics (graphs, schematics, flow sheets, and tables). Teachers should also instruct students in the use of "textual delineators" (captions or headings, itemization, and numbering of major parts of the text), in oral reporting, and in stylistic practices common in technical writing. (GW)

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TECHNICAL WRITING: THE REAL NEEDS*

by

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In the May 1965 issue of College Composition and Communication, W. Earl Britton examined, in the article "What Is Technical Writing," the definitions of technical writing given by earlier writers, and he then attempted to "extend" the earlier definitions. Together, the five definitions Britton deals with in his article represent one of the most complete statements to date on what technical is. And, as you will see, each of the five definitions points up a specific difference between technical writing and ordinary writing. These definitions, or descriptions, might just help you see what you must do as you change over from teaching freshman composition to technical writing.

The first definition Britton examines is a definition by subject matter. He quotes from Blickle and Passe's Readings for Technical Writers and from Mills and Walter's Technical Writing to show that technical writing is that writing which deals with "subject matter in science, engineering, and business." Subject matter, not the writing itself, is the difference.

The second category is that involving a linguistic approach. Britton cites Robert Hays' article "What is Technical Writing" from the April 1961 issue of Word Study as representing a linguistic approach. Hays says technical writing differs from ordinary writing in the writer's "attitude of utter seriousness" toward his subject. But he says that the greater difference "is linguistic . . . in that technical style demands a 'specialized vocabulary, especially in its adjectives and nouns.'" A

non-vernacular vocabulary is, then, a fundamental distinction between the two types of writing.

A third category of definition approaches the problem by concentrating on the thought processes. A. J. Kirkman, for example, says that history, literature, and the arts involve "associative thought," whose "statements are linked together by connectives like then and rather, indicating chronological, spatial, and emotional relationships." On the other hand, mathematics and science involve "sequential thought," whose "statements are connected by because and therefore, revealing a tightly logical sequence." Technical writing thus involves sequential thought.

And the fourth category is definition by purpose. Brooks and Warren in Understanding Poetry point up that technical writing strives for "absolute precision" in the communication of thought; and Reginald Kapp, in The Presentation of Technical Information, approaches the definition of technical writing by dividing writing into "imaginative literature," whose purpose is "to control men's souls"; and "functional literature," whose purpose is "to control their minds." Precision in sentence structure and in word choice are the special province of technical writing teachers, then.

Britton himself extends upon Kirkman's dichotomy between the two types of writing. He proposes "that the primary, though certainly not the sole, characteristic of technical and scientific writing is in the effort of the author to convey one meaning and only one meaning in what he says." Again, teaching precision in communicating ideas is a chief aim of a technical writing course.

None of these definitions aims at completeness or inclusiveness, and none of them aims at helping a novice instructor teach an effective course in technical writing or at helping students fresh out of English grammar and composition to master the craft of technical writing. Yet each underscores the fact that technical writing does differ from the writing taught in conventional freshman English courses or in creative writing courses. And, collectively, the five definitions suggest that the differences between technical and ordinary writing are many. Hence the question that these definitions must stir in the minds of you English teachers assembled here today: "What am I supposed to teach in a technical writing class that is different from what I taught in freshman composition?" Or to put the question a different way: "What in addition to grammar, usage, and rhetoric am I supposed to teach in order to prepare my students for the writing they will face in business and industry?" To answer this question is to get at the heart of the real needs of students preparing to enter the world of work.

Perhaps the most obvious subjects that you should teach in technical writing, but that you would not deal with in Freshman Composition, are the forms, applications, and categories of letters, memoranda, and reports. Your students should not have to study or practice writing essays per se anymore, but should instead study and practice these forms that they will encounter in their jobs.

Another topic that ought to be covered in technical writing is what John S. Harris calls "the language of graphics." Graphics may be subdivided into "pictorials" and "symbolic graphics." Pictorials include photographs,

drawings and paintings, and maps. "Symbolic graphics" include graphs, schematics, flow sheets, and numerically-based tables. Such graphics, it ought be noted, are intended to supplement rather than replace the verbal communication. Their purpose is to augment the written communication, to clarify, sometimes to simplify, what the words themselves say. Graphic devices are widely used, and used to advantage, in technical writing, and we ought to use them for the same purposes in other writing as well. The use of graphic devices where words don't do the full job for us is a technique I wish we could get across to our counterparts in freshman English. But the practice there is to depend exclusively on the word for communication.

A third topic that is not covered in traditional composition classes but that ought to be covered in technical writing classes is the subject of "textual delineators," as Frieda Purvis has labeled them in her forthcoming textbooklet Teaching Tech Writing to Radiologic Technologists. By textual delineators, I mean captions or headings, subcaptions or subheadings, itemization, and/or numbering of major parts of the writer's text. Textual delineators serve as organizational guides for the author and as reading aids for the reader. They clarify transitions, emphasize major points, subordinate lesser points, and label the salient parts of a communication. The use of such textual delineators is so strategically advantageous to authors that I am forever baffled about why they are not introduced in freshman English classes as helpmates for traditional rhetoric.

A fourth topic often taught in technical writing, but that is rarely taught in freshman composition, is oral reporting. Of course, this topic overlaps with many other topics covered in freshman composition as well as in technical writing -- topics such as rhetorical strategies, unity,

standard usage, and even graphic devices or visual aids. But since students do not often give their reports orally in their composition courses, oral reporting is especially valuable in their technical writing courses.

The fifth and last topic I'll mention that ought to be covered in technical writing is "Style." Unlike the four topics I've already pointed to, this topic is also taught in freshman composition. But is the style that is taught in freshman composition the same style that should be taught in technical writing? To a large extent, yes, the styles taught in both courses are the same. The writing for which students will be responsible in business and industry is, after all, similar in most respects to the writing of newspaper reporters, of speech writers, of historians, of novelists, and of anyone else whose success depends largely on ability with language. Whether writing reports or essays, for example, writers must have a command of punctuation, mechanics, grammar, and spelling -- or else they might confuse their readers with inaccuracies and project untutored images of themselves. From flexible vocabularies, essaysists and technical writers alike must be able to choose words whose denotations and connotations communicate their meanings with precision, and they must also be able to fit those words into clear sentences. They must also be able to arrange those sentences into coherent paragraphs and then be able to arrange their paragraphs into sensible sequences.

Yet in order to be successful in technical communications, writers must sometimes engage in certain stylistic practices that are not ordinarily taught in conventional writing courses or explained in traditional handbooks. The use of graphic devices or visual aids is a case in point. And, as Dwight Stevenson and J. C. Mathes point out in their article "Technical Writing: New Name of New Course" (which appeared in Vol. 2, No. 1, Fall 1975, TETYC),

Composition teachers have long taught students to edit for sentence pattern variety in their prose, but variety is at best a very minor characteristic of effective technical prose" -- as, for example, in directions for assembling a Heathkit Stereo amplifier, where parallel structures would help with clarity. And the same applies to the McCrimmon approach toward paragraph development, which typically results in paragraphs whose lengths render them intimidating, confusing, and altogether ineffective in reports, letters, or memoranda.

These, then, are several ways wherein technical writing differs from other writing. Since these points are not usually within the scope of introductory rhetoric courses, we who teach courses named "Business Writing," "Technical Writing," "Scientific Writing," and "Writing for Business and Industry" have a responsibility for introducing them to our students. They're what "technical writing" is really all about.